TO FANNY ROBINSON
*Edgeworthstown, 15 April 1782*

... So there have been wonderful revolutions in Wimpole Street, the rebel Angel is "fallen, fallen, fallen from the blest abode." But seriously how does Miss Denis, Miss Masin and Miss E. Dent do? All x-x-x w I hope.

This present day is one of the hottest we have had this summer, but I defy the sun and all its wicked works for I am seated in a shady arbour on the stump of an old tree – Do you envy me? – But perhaps you are insensible to the heat. I am sure you must be if you could sit baking in a playhouse to see Miss Siddons.

It is the utmost I would do to see Miss Burney for I am not, as you seem to be, Siddons mad, having only a likeness of her in a Review ... You are acquainted with Miss Burney, pray tell me all you know of her ... I read Evelina over twice, once with a malicious view of discovering a fault, but alas before I had read it half through, I forgot my intentions. Lord Orville is a man after my own heart – his character did not want a title to give it dignity; it is saying a great deal for the Hero but when I say the Heroine thought so too perhaps I say still more for her. It was the character of the man and not the lord she loved – Why then did Miss Burney give him a title – was it to recommend it to titled Readers? If so she did their taste or her Book great injustice ... And I may be so bold to say of her young Plebiean admirers some injury ... It is preparing for them Disappointment and Ennui at least ... Evelina had not title & but small fortune and she married an Earl! Will no conclusion be drawn from this? Will no hopes be raised?[3]

... As for the Book you are so kind as to enquire about – Alas, it is only a humble translation of Madame de Genlis' letters. I had just finished the third volume when a rival translation appeared in all its Glory – one volume however is printed and my father thinks of compressing the other two into one & publishing them in Dublin.

... What easy sprightly letters Grey's are (published by Mason) – I dare say you have read them – They are not the stiff performance of an author written under the rod of criticism and of a Presentment that they would be published as authors' letters usually are – All that I have seen of Pope's give me that idea, the style is too correct to be free ... Don't you think so? You hear I am asking

3 In Fanny Burney's novel, which was to be the model for respectable romantic fiction, Lord Orville is the high-minded hero who falls in love with the seventeen-year-old heroine and marries her after numerous vicissitudes.

trifling questions across the British channel with as little ceremony as if you were in the same room with me. I hope you will transport me, or at least my ideas, on return to Crawford ... If I should meet Miss Burney there – I should be completely happy – If there is any resemblance between her own character & her amiable Evelina, I should not only be desirous but ambitious of her friendship[4]...

*Maria's subsequent letters to Fanny Robinson show her becoming happily absorbed in her new life at Edgeworthstown, though still devouring a formidable number of books. Her father, impressed by Maria's intelligence and willingness to learn, decided to make her his bookkeeper and secretary for estate business and she rode out daily with him on her pony Dapple to inspect fields and outlying tenant farms. It was also a time of intense political excitement in Ireland: the Volunteer movement had sprung up ostensibly to 'defend' Ireland against a French invasion in the wake of the American revolution but in fact to put pressure on England to grant the Irish Parliament more political independence. Shortly afterwards it fizzled out, dissolved by its leader Lord Charlemont as it became apparent it could lead to more dangerous strains of insurrection.*

TO FANNY ROBINSON
*Edgeworthstown, 15 September 1783*

... You desire me to read Julia de Roubigne[5] ... I won't promise you I will, though I am as fond of Novels as you can be I am afraid they act on the constitution of the Mind as Drams do on that of the body ... But your recommendation will induce me to read any other species of books – Have you finished Rollins' Ancient History yet and how did you like it? I am reading the History of the only conqueror I will ever like – Peter justly called the Great. I shall read the life of Charles the Twelfth as soon as I have finished but I am afraid all Voltaire's Eloquence will not prevent my wishing his hero to lose every Battle ... I have finished Moliere's and begun Marivaux's Theatre ... – You see I read several Books on different subjects at a time ...

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4 Maria in fact wrote to Fanny Burney asking if she would accept a correspondent from Ireland but received no response.

5 Romantic epistolary novel by Henry Mackenzie, published 1777. Its opening words were 'The friendship of your Maria, misfortune can never deprive you of ...', which may be why Fanny had recommended it.

Now indulge me in talking to you of a subject which … fills my whole mind (except when it is empty) – the present state of Politics here. What should you think of a Civil War? Upon my word there is danger – The people are in a state of universal fermentation. The Counties, Corps, Provinces are all sending Delegates and making what they call Spirited Resolutions – a free Parliament is the cry – a free Parliament they will have or none at all – There is to be one of the greatest and most respectable meetings held on Monday next (to decide on some plan to be supported by the united exertions of the Volunteers of Ireland) that was ever seen in this … Country. My father went up to Town this morning to speak at it … They say your Ministry in England means to oppose with all their strength & the Catholics here hint that if they are not allowed the right of voting they will join them – But I cannot believe it, the ministers of England must be too well informed to think the Volunteer army nothing but a name, or to venture to trifle with several 1000 men in arms with a Charlemont, an Ogle and a Flood at their head – I tell you what, my dear Fanny, I am not too proud to be vain & so let me praise my father … His speech to the Leinster delegates was received with the greatest applause … Pray look sometimes at our Irish papers to see what's doing here … Cast your eye over a map of Ireland now and then that you mayn't be frightened when I talk of Drogheda & Dungannon & Tipperary & Carrickfergus & a few other such names …

*It is unlikely that Fanny Robinson, fresh from a London season, responded to Maria's interest in Irish politics. Meanwhile, Maria, remote from balls in rural Co. Longford, convinced herself that Fanny's social life in London would not have suited her and offered a further long lecture on Ireland, reflecting her father's views.*

TO FANNY ROBINSON

*Edgeworthstown, Autumn 1783*

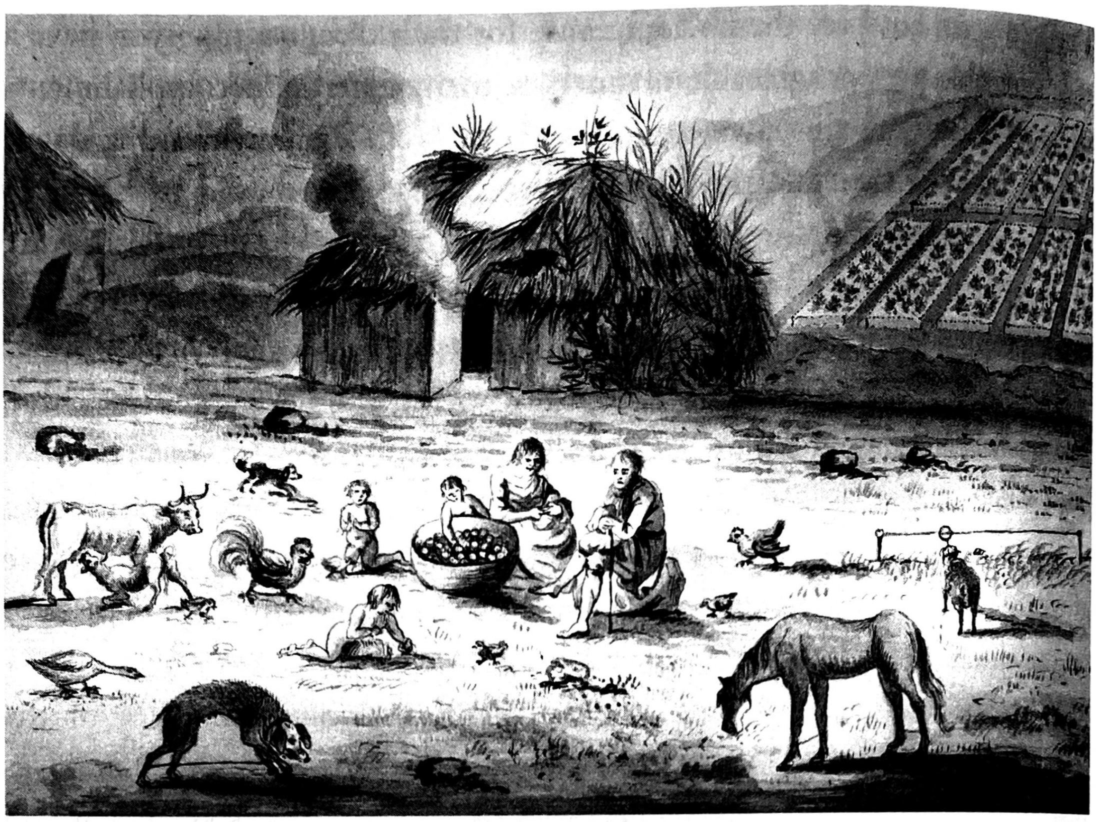
… You have mentioned in several letters that you are going to Balls. I have an odd opinion to ask you – are you happier at a Ball than anywhere else? You will laugh & say to be sure I am; or perhaps you will ask me why I make such a curious enquiry? I will tell you why – because I am inclined to believe that it is all the preparations, the Music, the dress, the praise & the bustle which constitute the charms of a Ball … Our tastes do not in these aspects

I believe agree but I see the obvious cause for their disagreeing – you have a very agreeable person, agreeable manners & many external accomplishments which I want – You are active, nimble & dance well. I am awkward & dance very ill, it is not therefore the least surprising that you should be happy in a ballroom where you are praised … or that I on the contrary with every personal disadvantage … should feel myself much less at my ease in company than amongst friends who set little comparative value on such qualifications … I know their value for I know the want of them, and the pain arising from that want is certainly the most exact measure of that worth …

I promised you my dear Miss Robinson that I would give you some account of the manners of the people I live amongst and that I would communicate all the observations I have an opportunity of making on the peculiarities of … the climate etc.

The Irish are perhaps the laziest civilised nation on the face of the Earth. To avoid a moment's present trouble they will bring on themselves real misfortunes. When urged by necessity (for without that spur they would never exert themselves) they work with excessive violence for a short space of time and then sink again into a species of torpid inaction – for this indolence peculiar to the Irish peasantry several reasons may be assigned … the most powerful is low wages of labour, 6d a day in winter and 8d in the summer … every day labourer has about 3 acres of land sown with potatoes enough to afford a subsistence to him and his wretched family. He does not covet or even seem to relish the luxuries and conveniences of life – they live in a hut whose mud built walls can scarcely support their weather beaten roofs, you may see the children playing before the *abris sans* shoes, *sans* stockings, *sans* everything – the father of the family on a fine summer's day standing in the sunshine at his door, while his house is ready to fall upon his head … You go up to him and tell him he had much better set about repairing his house – he would answer you Oh faith Honey, when it falls it will be time enough to think of picking it up …

… To conclude their character, the Irish are remarkably hospitable to strangers, friendly and charitable to each other; *à propos* about charity I must observe to you that the charity of the higher class of people is one of the greatest checks to industry. It encourages idleness amongst the Poor and increases the number or rather the swarms of Beggars, which invest the streets of Dublin. Let the rich raise the wages of labour, the rewards of industry, that would be true charity … The lower class of Irish are extremely



*An Irish family outside their cabin, drawn by Arthur Young in 1776 to illustrate his* Tour of Ireland, *though not used. Maria would have read Young's book and her letter to Fanny Robinson echoes Young's descriptions.*

eloquent, they have a volubility, a fluency and a facility of delivery which is really surprising … and they are good lawyers … necessity obliges them to exercise their abilities for fraud and artifices. The Irish language is now almost gone into disuse … except in their quarrels with each other. It is a remarkably harmonious language … the Irish claim their origin from the Phoenicians.

There are finer lakes in this country … than you could have any idea of; the face of the country is disfigured by large tracks of bog. It is supposed that these bogs were originally formed by the leaf and bark of immense forests of trees. A peasant who was working in bog owned by my Father found several feet below the surface a coat, a basket full of arms and a wooden bowl … the coat was neither knit or woven – it was of a manufacture quite unknown – my father has sent it over to the Royal Society …

You think my dear Fanny that I change my employments, my tastes, my pursuits every four months – I must tell you what I am about in my own defence; well I'm writing a book – a Book – yes a book and in six volumes, I began it a month ago and I have written two volumes, but I will tell you neither the title or the subject until it is published …